Review of Gail Levin, *Lee Krasner: A Biography HarperCollins, 2011, 546 pp.*

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In her new biography *Lee Krasner*, Gail Levin seeks to redress certain misconceptions about Krasner stemming from previous scholarship, that has portrayed Krasner as a sidenote to her more famous husband, Jackson Pollock. That the format of biography would be useful for such a project may have stemmed from Levin's personal involvement as a young art historian in Krasner's life, or perhaps even more suitably— and beguilingly— from Krasner's statement that her painting is "so autobiographical if anyone can take the trouble to read it" (Krasner, quoted in Levin, 11).[1]

Central to Levin's detailed account of Krasner's life is the author's wish— often explicitly stated—to demonstrate that Krasner was working in the modern idiom, most especially before meeting Pollock, and before many of her contemporaries at the National Academy of Design, Cooper Union and on the WPA. Levin shows that Krasner had an extensive art education and a deep understanding of modern art, a modern art that places Matisse, Picasso and Mondrian in the familiar (and all-male) pantheon. Surrealism comes up several times throughout the book, but, as was so often the case in modernist narratives, the movement was denigrated by Krasner, as when she discusses Surrealism in later interviews. In some ways Krasner's attitude toward Surrealism shows how thoroughly she may have absorbed her generation's notion of modernism.

Like many New Yorkers Krasner was first exposed to Surrealism through Alfred Barr's 1936 exhibition "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" at the Museum of Modern Art, a show that garnered extensive publicity and included some 700 objects, as well as film screenings and department store tie-ins. Indeed, Levin makes a point

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of discussing Krasner's fashionability in her younger years (though she later critiques other critics who bring up fashion in relation to female artists), and so the impact of Surrealism may likely have been felt not only within the museum's walls but around the corner at the Fifth Avenue shop windows of Bonwit Teller. Levin attributes the motif of eyes in Krasner's work of 1936-1937 with her exposure to the surrealist imagery at Barr's exhibition.

When the Surrealists arrive in New York during the war years, we learn of Krasner's participation, with Pollock, Matta, Baziotes and Motherwell, in the collaborative surrealist game Exquisite Corpse. Levin reports that Krasner and Pollock also experimented with automatic writing and stream of consciousness poetry (Levin, 200). Around the same time, Pollock's work was brought to the attention of Peggy Guggenheim, who, recently returned from Europe, opened her gallery Art of this Century in October, 1942, famously wearing mismatched earrings to represent her dual loyalties to both the abstract and surrealist branches of the avant-garde. In November, 1943, Pollock had his first solo exhibition there. Both Pollock and Krasner were included in Sidney Janis's *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*, published the following year, one of the first books to explore what Janis called "the Surreal aspect of American art which was under the influence of the artists-in-exile."[2] Krasner was featured on the side of "American Abstract Painters" and Pollock on the side of "American Surrealist Painters," though these categories were far from fixed entities as American artists worked through the lessons of Surrealism.

Categories that felt more rigid were the divisions between male and female artists. Krasner did not want to be referred to as a woman artist, nor did she like the label of American artist. Like many others, she makes the argument that being an artist is not a description that needs qualification.

Nonetheless, the art world of the 1940s was reflective of social inequities at large. As Krasner recalled, ""There were the artists and then there were the 'dames.' I was considered a 'dame' even if I was a painter too. And they had this terrible custom, the artists we knew. It was something they'd picked up from the Surrealists I think—they used to dress up their wives to go out to parties. Very elaborate costumes, and hairdos and everything"' (Krasner quoted in Levin, 199). The association of the inherent sexism of the early 1940s with surrealist fashion habits makes for an almost frivolous analysis of a serious issue, and Levin points out that Krasner herself was once proud to model the fashions that her boyfriend, fellow painter Igor Pantuhoff, picked for her to wear (Levin, 62).

Though the surrealist role in the formation of the American avant-garde has been much discussed (and much contested), Levin does not question Krasner's

assertion that what Surrealism really brought to New York was an attitude of sexism. "Krasner attributed these problems to 'a group of Surrealists who treated their women like well-groomed poodles and then the abstract expressionists—where we now have galleries, prices, money attention. Up to then it's a pretty quiet scene. That's when I am first aware of being a woman and a situation is there'" (Krasner quoted in Levin, 390). This quote comes from a 1977 interview with Krasner, and similar ideas were repeated in a 1981 interview. In the 1978 film by Barbara Rose, *Lee Krasner: The Long View*, Levin reports that Krasner "blames the arrival of the Surrealists in New York as the start of when women in the arts were degraded" (Levin, 416). Yet Levin also notes Krasner's indignation—and disobedience—of a rule at the National Academy that prevented women from going to the basement, the designated area for still life painting because the fish used as the subjects of the works were slower to rot there. This incident "was the first time I had experienced real separation as an artist, and it infuriated me. You're not being allowed to paint a . . . fish because you're a woman" (Krasner, quoted in Levin, 68). Again Levin points out the discrepancy between this incident and Krasner's statement—"I had absolutely no consciousness of being discriminated against until abstract expressionism came into blossom"—but does not pursue it further (Krasner, quoted in Levin, 69).

Levin's research is meticulous and detailed, yet she doesn't probe the contradictions that Krasner's interview record betrays. Levin presents the reader with accumulated data, but misses the opportunity to explore the motivations behind Krasner's strategic self-styling of her history later in her life, even while reporting disputes that Krasner had over her insistence of controlling what art historians wrote about her. This is an issue that all biographers face and one that could have been productively tackled head on, especially considering Levin's own role in Krasner's later history.

While Surrealism doesn't warrant a line in Levin's index (though Breton has several entries), it holds the place in Krasner's memory, as the source of the New York art world's sexism. One wonders if this has as much to do with the historical record as with what Surrealism might later have came to embody for Krasner. What Krasner really seems to have a problem with—what Surrealism retrospectively comes to represent—is the institutionalization of certain biases that arose as a result of the New York School's rise to prominence.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s when Krasner was giving these interviews, we can see how Surrealism had been used by American critics as a sort of heuristic bridge between European and American art, in which Surrealism was something to be overcome in order to facilitate the so-called triumph of American art. Krasner seemed wary of such characterizations: "When I see those big labels, 'American,'

I know someone is selling something. I get very uncomfortable with any kind of chauvinism—male, French or American" (Krasner, quoted in Levin, 391). Krasner seems to be a feminst *avant la letter,* though Levin takes pains to point out that she did not agree with the need for feminist art. Yet this statement is more fascinating because it is made by the woman who is largely credited for cultivating the market for American painting, and for being in a position to do so because she was married to the man who arguably benefitted the most from postwar nationalism in the art world.

There are striking contradictions brought to bear here, and Lee Krasner's experience exemplifies the reasons why overarching narratives are no longer sufficient to describe the variegated production of modernism. But narratives still matter—just as Surrealism was once used to scaffold American Art, Krasner was acutely aware of her supporting role as wife of Pollock. Perhaps this is why, in the 1980s, Krasner lobbies William Rubin for a retrospective of her work to take place at MoMA. Her first solo museum show in the U.S., it was eventually curated by Barbara Rose in 1984, opening at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston on Krasner's 75th birthday. Though Krasner passed away before the show traveled to MoMA later that year, she clearly realized it was necessary to make her own interventions in the rewriting of the modern art narrative.

1 Art historian Anne Wagner intelligently foregrounds this statement in her insightful analysis of the multiple roles Krasner played in life, art and art history and the difficulty of biography. See Anne M. Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 105-190.

2 Sidney Janis, interview with Paul Cummings, Tape 3, Side 1 (April 18, 1972), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. It is unclear if Janis had, by 1972, forgotten MoMA's 1943 exhibition of Magic Realism, or if he simply did not consider that show to have demonstrated surrealist tendencies.